**A narrative analysis of South African women lived experiences: A Case of Mapula Embroidery Project.**

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**Abstract**

The aim of the study is to analyse how Mapula Embroidery Project women learn while participating in the project on their individual and collective transformation. Mapula Embroidery Project is a women initiative aimed at creating opportunities for unemployed women in Winterveldt, Pretoria. This paper focuses on three tenets of critical pedagogy: reflection upon the individual’s lived experience, development of voice through a critical look at one’s world and society and transforming society toward equality for all citizens through active participation in democratic imperatives. In addition, this paper presents the stories of five black women with a view of examining how women from a background of extreme deprivation transform while participating in the project. Data were collected through these women life histories and interviews and analysed by using narratives model. The findings show that the Mapula Embroidery Project had major impact on the institution and on individual women in their homes. The study also found that apart from poverty alleviation and the dignity of employment of these women, they are able to tell their stories and develop their own ideas through their embroideries. In conclusion, an attempt is made to provide cues for the conditions under which the self-empowering projects can function to improve the lives of unemployed women in South Africa. This also helps them in their quest for a sense of control in their own lives within their interpersonal relationships and within the social structures within which they live.

**Key Words:** transformational learning, critical pedagogy, narratives, embroidery, self- empowering projects

**Introduction and Background**

The majority of women in South Africa live in rural areas where poverty and underdevelopment is the order of the day. Women in the Mapula Embroidery project are not an exception. According to Schmahmann (1999), Mapula meaning ‘mother of rain’ suggests not only rainfall and impending harvests but also womens’ association with the forces of fertility – of both land and people and with female agency more generally. Mapula Embroidery project in the Winterveld was founded in 1991, when the Winterveld was still part of the former ‘homeland’ of Bophuthatswana. It is a women initiative aimed at creating opportunities for unemployed women in the impoverished Winterveldt, Pretoria. This initiative promotes participation of these women towards the goals of social and economic independence and social justice.

**Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to analyse the process of personal transformations through narratives of women who are currently involved in the Mapula Embroidery Project. Through reflection upon their individual’s lived experiences, participants’ early and current experiences of oppression and liberation in their personal, social and community lives were explored. The meaning of the Mapula Embroidery Project women journeys from being oppressed to being transformed was also discussed. This study makes a valuable contribution to the field by providing experiences and reflections of the lessons learnt by the Mapula embroidery project women. It is hoped that their work will serve as a useful reference to up and coming projects and to promote extensive women participation, dialogue and co-operation.

This article proceeds with a brief discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning this research. The second section presents the methods employed to collect and analyse data followed by the results and discussions of five women who told their stories of how they learn while participating in the project on their individual and collective transformation. The article concludes by offering recommendations informed by the results from the study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical pedagogy evolves from the well-established discourse of critical theory (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Burbules & Berk, 1999; Freire, 1970, 1995, 1998; 2007; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2003). We found critical theory most appropriate as a theoretical framework, in which reflection upon the individual’s lived experience, development of voice through a critical look at one’s world and society and transforming society toward equality for all citizens through active participation in democratic imperatives take centre stage. Among the critical pedagogy scholars, Freire (1998) maintains that students should be transformative intellectuals, cultural workers capable of identifying and redressing the injustices, inequalities, and myths of an often oppressive world. According to Freire (1970), critical pedagogy begins with recognizing that human beings exist in a cultural context:

People as beings “in a situation,” find themselves rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark. They will tend to reflect on their own “situationality” to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it. Human beings *are* because they are in a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it. (Freire 1970: 90)

Though Freire (1970) does not thoroughly explore the spatial aspects of ‘situationality’, this passage from his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* demonstrates the importance of space, or place, to critical pedagogy’s origins. Being in a situation has a spatial, geographical, contextual dimension. Reflecting on one’s situation corresponds to reflecting on the space(s) one inhabits; acting on one’s situation often corresponds to changing one’s relationship to a place. Freire (1970) argues that acting on one’s situationality, makes one more human. It is this spatial dimension of situationality, and its attention to social transformation, that connects critical pedagogy with pedagogy of place. Both discourses are concerned with the contextual, geographical conditions that shape people and the actions people take to shape these conditions. The purpose of critical pedagogy is to engage people in the act of what Freire (1970) calls conscientisation, which has been defined as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970:17).

According to McLaren & Giroux (1990:263) a critical pedagogy must be pedagogy of place, that is, it must address the specificities of the experiences, problems, languages, and histories that communities rely upon to construct a narrative of collective identity and possible transformation. These expressions of critical pedagogy focus on the importance of people telling their own stories (reading the world) in a place where people may be both affirmed and challenged to see how individual stories are connected in communities to larger patterns of domination and resistance in a multicultural, global society. Story-telling is one of the primary forms of through which the dialogical nature of the human mind and shared understanding emerge (Hermans 1993; Randal 1995). Hence, this study is situated within the narrative approach.

This is a qualitative research whose framework employed field data on the narratives of lived experiences of Mapula Embroidery Project in Winterveldt, Pretoria. The narrative approach is situated within the ethnographic research method since the researchers examine situations through the eyes of the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008). The research sample was purposive with five Mapula project women and cannot be generalised to other populations. We used narrative methods as a way to open up dialogue with Mapula project women to tell how they ‘understand things’ (Descombe, 1998). The questions in the focus group interview were framed using the language that the women in the project would understand. For the purpose of this study, the three tenets of critical pedagogy were used to develop the focus group interview guide used for data collection and to guide the data analysis. This allowed us to ask questions that are relevant to the domains of the critical theory. The orientation toward understanding the story within the respondents’ social situation, locating not only what is said and not said, but also the way in which events are placed and the importance given to them (Gilbert, 2002), was critical to a sound study in the area of Mapula Embroidery Project.

Our narrative analysis was further contextualized by Miles & Huberman’s (1994) three main stages of data analysis. The first stage is data reduction which involved transcribing and summarising the data from all sources. The second stage involved organising the reduced data, generating major themes from oral and written texts. The third stage covered the interpretations and drawing of conclusions from the analysed data. The interviews were then transcribed in detail. To make the Mapula embroidery project women’ stories more readable, the transcribed interviews were then re-written as summarised and logical stories. To make sure that there were no major changes to the content of the the Mapula embroidery project women narratives, they were compared with the original transcripts and the tapes from the interviews. The project womens' narratives were then organised thematically. Fictitious names were used in this study to protect the identities of these project women.

**Trustworthiness**

The researchers used different techniques to maintain trustworthiness of the final product of the study. The researchers listened to the participants, because the most important aim was to capture each research participants’ voice. Assurance was given to participants their contributions were worthy and respected and that their voices were higher value than their grammar (Cladandinin & Connelly 2000). The researchers also began writing early, reported fully and captured fieldwork notes accurately. Furthermore, the researchers were straightforward at all times aware of their subjectivity.

Several scholars have suggested various verification procedures to ensure the quality of qualitative research. In our case there was a focus on prolonged engagement and persistent observation as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in the Mapula Embroidery project, whereby one of the researchers worked with people day in and day out for a long period. She has built trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking to ascertain whether there are any misunderstandings and misinformation. In member checks, the researcher solicits the research subject’s view of the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This technique can be considered as a “way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with participants’ experiences” (Curtin & Fossey 2007:92). This verification procedure involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the research subjects so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account.

**Ethical Consideration**

The researchers endeavoured to adhere to important ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from all the people who participated in the investigation. Participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity and were made aware of the fact that their participation in the study was voluntary and any of them could pull out at any time they wanted to.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Five women told their own stories of how they learn while participating in the project on their individual and collective transformation. Creswell and Miller (2000), therefore, talked about the importance of using thick description in narrative studies. By this, they meant that the narratives draw the reader more closely into the story. Rich, thick description means that the researcher describes in detail the participants and the settings of the study. In this way, the inquirer enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics (Creswell, 1998). By using these verification procedures, the researchers are faithful to both facts and facilities (Denzin, 1989), and we can develop the narratives from the research field into stories that are believed. The following three themes emerged from the stories of the Mapula embroidery projects.

**Theme 1: Reflection upon the individual’s lived experience**

Only humans embody the ability to reflect and act upon those reflections in order to transform their worlds (Freire, 2007). To understand a human being, her or his actions, thoughts, and reflections, you have to look at the environment, or the social, cultural, and institutional context in which the particular individual operates. The respondents reflected upon their uniquely individual experiences. For instance, Thembi, a mother, born in Limpopo completed her studies at standard 8.

**Thembi:** *I then moved to Pretoria, with the aim of seeking a job. It was difficult to get one; I then decided to continue with my studies and enrolled at the Adult Centre. While studying for my Grade 12, I joined Mapula in April, 1991. I completed my studies and obtained the Senior Certificate. My interest in the embroidery project grew from strength to strength as my passion lies in doing crafts/handwork. For me, Mapula Embroidery project has played a significant role in my life.*

In order for the Mapula Embroidery project women to take power, they need to gain information about themselves and their environment and their stories have to reflect their past lives. Thembi’s reflection on her situation therefore corresponds to reflecting on the place she inhabits. This assertion shows that as Thembi is not isolated and independent of her context. Most women experience difficulties as their lives unfolded but they always find a way to escape oppression. Freire (1970) argues that thinking critically allows people to recognise connections between their individual problems and experiences and their social contexts in which they are embedded. Vele and Sesi were recruited by their facilitator who invited them to join the Mapula embroidery project. Although they knew nothing about embroidery, they were ready to learn. Vele, a 49 year old was retrenched at the time she joined the project.Menge, unlike Vele and Sesi started embroidering at the Mapula embroidery project ‘*doing it for others’*. She was not interested to join the project. After much persuasion by the facilitators she joined and at that time the income per product was R30.00 each. One of the women Thoko, joined the Mapula Embroidery project in 1991 through a neighbour who was also involved in the project but using her (Thoko’s) skills to embroider her cloths.

**Thoko:** *She offered me R10.00 for each product and I really appreciated it for I could buy a loaf of bread for my children. As the breadwinner with eight children and deserted by my husband, Mapula ignited a spark of new life in me. I used the money earned to buy and sell fried fish. However, the facilitator of the project was not happy that I was using my hands for another woman’s benefit in the project. She urged me to be a full member of the project and offered me an opportunity of joining Mapula Embroidery project. When I joined Mapula, I was sharing one room with my children.*

Thoko’s acting on her situation often corresponds to changing her relationship to a place. From this assertion, one can say women have made significant contributions to uplifting the standard of living in rural areas, despite limited resources at their disposal (Kabeer 2003:118; Ntshona 2001:19; Ross et al. 2006:4). From the stories of the Mapula embroidery project, there is a consensus that the intention of critical pedagogy is to contribute to a more socially just world (Kinchloe 2004). Thoko’s narration provides invaluable insights about the struggles and aspirations of females in a transforming society. Human knowledge of the world is dependent on the individual’s past and present experiences, her or his values, the people the stories are being told to (the addressees), and when and where they are being told (Bakhtin, 1986). Through their narratives, Thoko and other women in the project have the opportunity to critically reflect on their beliefs and practices to enable them to learn and grow from this experience. It is only through the process of critical reflection that the project women began to see reality as an on-going process and gained a better understanding of their own realities and its impact in their lives.

**Theme 2: Development of voice through a critical look at one’s world and society**

More and more scholars (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, 1999, 2000; Andrews, 2000; Gudmundsdottir, 2001; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002; Moen, Gudmundsdottir, & Flem, 2003) within the narrative approach use the term voices rather than voice because they recognize that the narratives are in part personal stories shaped by the knowledge, experiences, values and feelings of the persons who are telling them. The experiences of the Mapula embroidery project women were codified as a way of coming to a level of understanding what they have accomplished (Freire & Macedo 1987). For instance Sesi took a critical look at how Mapula Embroidery project contributed to her well-being.

**Sesi:** *From doing nothing all day long Mapula has given us the opportunity to interact with the rich and the famous, locally and internationally. The drawings on my cloths depict current issues, such as caring and support for People Living with HIV and AIDS and the massacre and the killing of miners in Marikana.*

This assertion shows that Mapula embroidery project displays the creativity of South African women. From this assertion the drawings frequently chosen by the embroiderers addresses current issues. In this case the narratives capture both the embroiderers and her context. In Walter Fisher’s narrative theory, narration means a theory of symbolic actions, words, or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them (Fisher, 1999:266). On the same nerve, Menge demonstrated how she does her embroidery on the cloth.

**Menge:** *Trimming on the whole drawing e.g. elephant, flower or bird, I choose the colours to match the natural environment, To make a statement, I use contrasting colours, for instance, to stop rhino poaching, I use a red thread in the whole body of the rhino to convey the message of the rhinos killed.*

Now from Menge and Sesi’s stories one can conclude that an identity growing through participation in a specific community is fundamentally temporal and we are constantly constructing who we are in social context (Wenger 1998). The drawings in the embroideries of Menge and Sesi bring about the dialogue of what they think and feel about their messages and resemble the actual realities of their everyday lives. Through their embroideries, women are able to have their voices heard and discuss issues they face. This is how conscientisation is realised.

**Thoko:** *Our project, won the FNB award, I really appreciated the moment of ascending the stage to receive a cheque for the first time in my life. I used the money to buy cement and sink to make an extension to accommodate my family. The project won another award and this time I experienced sleeping in a hotel for the first time in my life with plenty food to choose from and a housekeeper making up my bed. The sponsors of the second award, asked for our banking details, through the assistance of my daughter she read the bank statement to me. Each participant received a substantial amount from the sponsors and I was able to pay off the bricks and roof tiles at the local hardware. I bought more building materials and got builders to start on the project of building my house.*

The above assertion shows that knowledge emerges through constant invention, re-invention and perusing the process of inquiry (Freire, 2007). This means that human knowledge and personal identities are continually constructed and revised. Thoko’s story shows that the Mapula embroidery project had major impact on the institution and on individual women in their homes. Her narration of experience comes naturally. Thoko is an uneducated woman, who couldn’t read the bank statement but managed to extend her house with the money from the project awards. We therefore regard the Mapula embroidery project as the critical educator who has managed to raise ambitions, desires and real hope for those who wish to take social justice seriously (Giroux 1988).

**Theme 3:** **Transforming society toward equality for all citizens through active participation in democratic imperatives.**

Critical theory is a call for reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire 1974). Freire’s notion of coscientization, that is, becoming more fully human through transforming the oppressive elements of reality, is at the centre of critical pedagogical practice. In this case, women in the Mapula project focused on their situationality which made them more human. By focusing on their situationality, makes the Mapula project women aware of what Freire (2007) calls their ‘limit-situations’ in order to transform them. In the case of Thembi, we see her moving from an ordinary passive citizen to actively championing her own development through the project.

**Thembi:** *When I joined Mapula, I use to stay in a three roomed house with four children, three girls and a boy. I worked very hard in the project to better my life. Ultimately, I managed to add four rooms in the existing house, a bathroom and four outside rooms for my children. Through Mapula, I have pursued my studies and am proud to say I have persevered and at present, I am an Adult Education and Training (AET) educator at the same institution teaching the core learning area in AET Level 4, Life Orientation and have enrolled with Unisa for the Adult Basic Education Certificate courses. Mapula has made much difference in my life. For the first time in my life, I boarded an aeroplane to represent the project in England at the South African projects celebration. Mapula has brought joy in my life and I want to encourage all women who are unemployed to strive to use their hands to put bread on the table. Like women at Mapula Embroidery, let us unite and with our hands do it for ourselves.*

From Thembi’s narration, the researchers maintain that the more a person believes in her ability to create a positive change in her life, the more likely that person will take the necessary action due to her increased sense of personal agency (Bandura, 2004). Critical pedagogy provides a platform for individuals to assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell. Thembi has dealt critically with reality and discovered how to transform her life (Darder, 1991) and now she is urging for other women to do the same. The process of claiming voice is therefore basically an interaction between the individual’s beliefs and experiences and past, present and future external voices. The above narrative shows that the Mapula Embroidery Project had major impact on the institution and on individual women in their homes. From staying in a three roomed house to building a seven roomed house shows that Thembi was liberated from being powerless to effectively develop capability to live the life she desires.

Change takes place through critical reflection and becoming critically reflective of one’s own assumptions is the key to transforming one’s taken-for-granted frame of reference, an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change (Mezirow, 2000). According to Freire (2007), the notion of ‘untested feasibility’ which lies on one’s consciousness also lies hidden beyond many limit-situations, causing one’s consciousness to believe that getting beyond these limit situations is unattainable. Mapula embroidery project has made progress in reducing poverty, nurturing economic growth, expanding opportunities for women and it has also led to raising their living standards. This progress is evident in Vele’s narration.

**Vele:** *We continued with our embroidery, the products were sold and we received some income from the sales. With the income received, we were able to buy food, clothes and to pay school fees for our children. Through Mapula embroidery project, I have learnt to use my hands and to do it for myself to better my life. I have opened a savings account for rainy days in case of life’s challenges, I am able to go to the bank and withdraw some cash. Had it not been for Mapula, I would not know anything about going to the banks.*

The responses provided by Vele shows that apart from poverty alleviation and the dignity of employment of these women and socio-economic benefits, they are able to tell their stories and develop their own ideas through their embroideries. Vele’s involvement in the project has broadened her horizon and allows her to see reality from a totally different view. Her voice echoed a person who has overcome limiting beliefs about herself and one could pick a sense of confidence, pride, critical and independent thinking when she responds to the question. Vele’s story addresses pertinent issues in her life and her ability to impact upon each and every situation in her life.

**Sesi*:*** *I have made different products and I can proudly say, many people admire my embroideries which are often bought at the exhibitions. Mapula embroidery project enabled women to generate some income to feed our families. It is through the embroidery project that we are women of worth. At present I am the coordinator of a project offering care and support to orphans in our community. My own children are educated through Mapula. As the head of my household I have kept the fires burning and indeed Mapula project has brought much difference in my life.*

The above assertion provides us with what Macedo, Drudy, Siegel & Speros (1993) call multivoiced text. It represents the reactions of women to their collective experiences in the project. From the voice ‘*we are women of worth’*, we can say the Mapula Embroidery project did not only reduce poverty and unemployment among these women, it also brought about social cohesion in the project. It also provided fertile conditions for entrepreneurship which significantly empowered and unite the women. The women in this project participate fully in efforts to liberate themselves from conditions that hinder their progress. From their voices, the Mapula embroidery women feel inventive and resourceful as evidenced in involvement of Sesi in a project offering care and support to orphans in her community. Menge’s voice echoed solidarity amongst the project women, they have actively set out to change their lives in ways that also benefit others. Mapula embroidery project women also work through issues in their lives by critically reflecting on how they exist and coming up with ways and means, as individuals and as a collective, of liberating themselves from oppressed situations.

Menge: *Women in our neighbourhood are close knit family participating in Mapula Embroidery project. When there is shortage of material in the project I take the initiative of buying so as to continue with my embroideries. I am striving to be an example to my children I have received a certificate acknowledging my expertise and an accredited one from the government. I want my children to start their own project in future in another part of the country, should employment opportunities not be available. I am a proud embroiderer who likes telling stories through my embroideries about my culture in Limpopo.*

For most women like Menge, storytelling is a natural way of recounting experience, a practical solution to a fundamental problem in life, creating reasonable order out of experience (Moen, 2006). Menge indicated that that she had experienced respect from other participants as well as from the community since she joined the project. The sharing of personal stories enhanced the Mapula embroidery project women’s evolution from being separated to being connected and this can be seen as an important ingredient in becoming multiculturally competent.

***Menge:*** *I am able to take part and to contribute monthly dues to the local burial societies and to work together with other women in funerals, weddings and graduation ceremonies. Although I still experience poverty, it is not as extreme as in the past when I went from neighbour to neighbour to ask for help in kind or cash.*

Menge’s story shows that it is the dynamic way people interact, the meanings they attribute to and the interpretations they make of others, objects and symbols that characterise this phenomenological perspective (Cohen *et al.* 2008:25). This shows that narratives focused on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell. Stories cannot be isolated from these women’s cultural context. Experience of the world, like each person’s perception of her- or himself, is a continuously developing narrative that is constantly forming and changing form. Therefore, realising one’s consciousness ‘conscientization’ is a needed first step of ‘praxis’ (Freire, 1970). Praxis is defined as the power and the know-how to take action against oppression while stressing the importance of liberating education (Freire, 1970). In the analysis of data, it became evident that human experience is always narrated focussing on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell. As her study indicates, Mapula embroideries are remarkable works of art that help us understand how women use their creativity and experiential knowledge in practice situation.

**CONCLUSION**

This article examined how women from a background of extreme deprivation transform while participating in the project. The researchers have situated the narrative research approach within the framework of critical theory, and they have presented Mapula women reflections. The study showed how Mapula Embroidery Project women learn while participating in the project on their individual and collective transformation. It also showed how the project women become empowered through the development of critical thinking as they begin to see themselves as agent of change. The responses provided by women showed that as a result of Mapula embroidery project their sense of self-worth improved and their status and conditions of lives improved. Through persistent and effective participation of the Winterveldt women in the Mapula project, their community participation has also improved.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings the study recommends that serious campaigns by the Pretoria municipality should be made to provide cues for the conditions under which the self-empowering projects can function to improve the lives of unemployed women in South Africa. To make meaningful, rapid and sustained progress in reducing poverty and unemployment among women, both provincial and national governments should form partnerships with business people and rethink the use of empowerment projects like Mapula embroidery project to develop the capabilities of women and to create opportunities among rural unemployed women.

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